

"He Cares for You"

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Dr. Frank J. Allen, Jr., Pastor

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida

1Peter 5:6-11

Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time. **7** Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you. **8** Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. **9** Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering. **10** And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you. **11** To him be the power forever and ever. Amen.

FEAR AND ANXIETY IN THE BIBLE

There was a campaign many years ago that implored us to "just say no" to drugs.

Well, it seems like there's a similar campaign in the Bible to "just say no" to fear and anxiety.

Peter wrote, "Cast all your anxiety on him for he cares for you."

His advice repeats what we hear throughout the Bible.

When it comes anxiety or fear, just say "no".

This was God's message to Abraham.

This was God's message to Moses and the people he led out of captivity in Egypt.

This was God's message to God's people as they fought enemies and struggled to enter the Promised Land.

This was God's word to the prophets.

When Jesus was born this was God's word to the shepherds.

Jesus told his disciples again and again, “Don’t be afraid.”

And when the women came to the empty tomb on the day of resurrection, what was the message of the angel? “Don’t be afraid.”

This theme continues in the early church.

In the book of Acts, again and again God’s apostles are told, “Don’t be afraid.”

The apostle Paul wrote in his letter to Philippians, “Have no anxiety about anything”.

Those words of reassurance scattered throughout the Bible are very helpful because quite frankly fear and anxiety are everywhere.

The Patriarchs, the Prophets, Paul, the angels and Jesus preach the same message,

“Don’t be afraid”. “Cast your anxiety on the Lord.”

EASIER SAID THAN DONE

I hear that message.

I want to believe that message.

Those words are reassuring and helpful.

But, sometimes I just can’t do that.

I can’t say “no” to the fear and anxiety in my life.

It’s just there.

Sometimes it’s due to a problem that I’m having or a threat that I perceive.

But, at other times the fear just seems to materialize out of thin air.

I’m nervous.

I don’t know why.

I just am.

That is, by the way, the technical definition of anxiety.

Anxiety is a persistent fear that lingers for no apparent reason.

The Bible tells us,

“Don’t be afraid.
Have no anxiety.
Cast your anxiety on the Lord.”

And yet, quite often, on the inside I’m just a ball of nerves.

Many of you remember the comic actor, Don Knotts.
His most famous role was when he played Barney Fife.
Barney was a hapless deputy sheriff on the Andy of Mayberry Show.

Don made a living playing a guy who was obviously nervous.
But, he wouldn’t admit it ... to himself or to the world around him.

It made for some hilarious displays of false bravado and odd plot twists.
He was trying his best to “just say no” to his anxiety, but his efforts never
seemed to be a success.

I think we liked Don Knotts because his acting told the truth about the hu-
man condition.

On the inside we’re often just as nervous.
We might hide it, but on the inside anxiety and fear are always lurking at
the door.

Some respond with anger and violence.
Some cower in the corner in fear.
But, the root cause is the same.

The Bible says, “Don’t be afraid.”
And yet we are afraid.

They say the first step to dealing with a problem is to admit that you have
one.

We have a problem.
Fear and anxiety threaten our happiness.
Fear and anxiety cloud our decisions.
Fear and anxiety destroy our most important relationships.

And, most important of all, fear and anxiety prevent us from following Christ.

Fear and anxiety prevent us from effectively proclaiming the gospel.

When we are afraid all the time, we dare not follow Christ.

We dare not take up a cross.

But, when we fear the cost of discipleship so much that we do nothing, we also forfeit the possibility of new life. We give up an abundant, eternal life for a life that is self-centered and self-defeating.

THE DILEMMA: FEAR VERSUS FAITH

This was the dilemma facing the Christians to whom Peter wrote this letter.

They had experienced rejection by society.

They knew what it was like to be exiles, to be the victim of prejudice and persecution.

And it didn't look like things would be getting better any time soon.

In fact, it looked like it would get worse.

They had good reason to be afraid.

I'm sure some thought that their best course of action would be to lay low and not make any waves.

But, if they did that, there would be no one to explain why their way of life was different.

There would be no one to preach the gospel.

They were God's light shining in the darkness.

But, fear and anxiety threatened to drag them back into the darkness.

They had to say no to fear. But, how?

THE ROOT OF FEAR: PRIDE

Today's lesson is helpful because it not only tells us to say no to fear.

Today's lesson also tells us how to say no to fear.

We learn about the root cause of fear and anxiety.

And I bet it's a reason you cannot guess.

Why are we overwhelmed by fear and anxiety?

According to this passage debilitating fear is caused by pride.

Our passage for today begins with these words,
 “Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God ...”

The “therefore” in verse 6 refers to verse 5 that precedes our lesson.
 That verse in part reads,
 “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.”

Humility is the key to overcoming anxiety, humility before God.

Do depend entirely upon ourselves when things go wrong?
 Do we depend entirely upon our own resources for safety and security?
 Do we believe that it’s all up to us?

If that’s true, then our greatest problem is not fear.
 Our greatest problem is faith.

Christian humility is not demeaning or self-loathing behavior.
 Christian humility is acknowledging the obvious fact that God is God.
 And we’re not.

Unfortunately, sometimes our pride prevents us from affirming the obvious.
 Instead of trusting in God’s grace, we trust in our own abilities.
 We assert our independence instead of affirming our dependence upon the
 grace of God.

But, as Jesus once put it, He is the vine, and we are the branches.
 We are not independent of God, for in God we live and move and have our
 being.

SUFFERING AND FAITH

Now, listen carefully to what I’m saying.
 God is NOT the author of suffering.

But, when we suffer (either due to evil or to the fact that we are mortal),
 God CAN use that suffering to deepen our faith.

It doesn't necessarily happen that way.
But, it can happen that way.

Someone once said that "Americans can be counted on to do the right thing after trying every other alternative." I would say that quite often we Christians can be counted upon to trust God after exhausting every other alternative.

But, in times of great uncertainty, we are often forced to truly put our trust in God.

We are humbled by difficult circumstances.

And this can enable us to truly worship God instead of worshipping our own ambitions.

Notice that in our lesson for today we read, "Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God ..."

Humility is rightly directed toward God.

We are "under the mighty hand of God."

It is helpful for us to dwell upon the nature of God.

God is the Creator, the one who made heaven and earth.

And if we humble ourselves before this Creator God,

if we get it into our soul that God is the Author of all that is and be awed by that,

it calms our fears.

All things in this world are not good.

But, God is able to work all those things together for good.

And we take hope in the fact that one day, "in due time", in God's own time, God is going to lift up those who have been thrown down.

This restoration may happen in this life or the life to come.

But, it will happen.

Why? Because the Creator God is also the author of grace.

And in due time we will see God's glory.

CAST ALL OUR ANXIETY ON HIM

But, what do we do in the meantime?
 How can we live a life free of anxiety when the world is such an anxious place?
 We do more than just say “no” to anxiety.

According to verse seven we, “Cast all” our “anxiety on him ...”
 Casting our anxiety on God is the way that we humble ourselves.

The ultimate responsibility for our lives rests not with us but with God.
 And so we cast all our anxiety on God.

Anxiety refers both to the cares of the world and godly cares.
 Any and all cares that might cause worry are to be turned over to the mighty hand of God.

So how can we do this?
 What prompts us to turn over our anxiety to the Lord?

It is this, the bedrock conviction of faith.
 “He cares for you.”
 God cares for us

Like a shepherd tending his sheep, so God cares for God’s chosen ones.
 We are the sheep of his pasture.
 We trust in him.

This past week I was watching a TV show called Lucky Dog.
 This show is about a trainer who rescues dogs from the pound and trains them for new owners.
 In this case he rescued a black lab.

This dog immediately trusted the trainer.
 He learned to sit almost immediately.
 He also learned to the down command right away.

This dog was so mellow that he would even walk on a leash without pulling.

Those of us who are dog lovers find these moments to be special.

To see an animal who was in danger of losing his life bond so quickly with a new master was touching.

This dog would definitely go on to live a productive life, maybe even as a therapy dog.

What made the difference?

This dog trusted the master.

The dog seemed to know instinctively that this was a good human who would care for him.

Sometimes I think dogs know more than we do.

Dogs can teach us a thing or two about loyalty.

They can be a beautiful example of how trust transforms a relationship.

If only we could be as trusting when it comes to our relationship with the Lord. Maybe we could be more trusting if we thought more about the nature of God.

GOD CARES FOR US

Who is God?

That's the most important question we can ask.

The Bible answers that question this way, "God is love."

And because God is love ...

God loves us.

God cares for us.

The word translated "care" in our lesson for today indicates continuous action.

God is always in the process of caring for us.

I often use a verse from the book of Lamentations as a Declaration of Pardon in our liturgy.

"The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases.

His mercy never comes to an end.

Great is thy faithfulness." (Lamentations 3:21-23)

Some of you may recognize the fact that words to the popular hymn, Great is Thy Faithfulness comes from these verses. Many of us have found great comfort and hope in the singing of that hymn.

But, it's the context of those verses that really give the words power, The context of the book of Lamentations is the Babylonian Captivity.

Jerusalem has been destroyed and God's people have once again become slaves in a foreign land.

This poem expresses the overwhelming grief of God's people. It is a funeral dirge filled with despair.

But, right in the middle of such despair hope breaks through.

That hope does not come from their situation. It is dire.

That hope does not come from the actions of God's people. They have been unfaithful.

Hope comes from the nature and character of God.

God is faithful.

God is merciful.

God's love never comes to an end.

God cares for us even when we do not care for ourselves.

THE ROARING LION

So, why can't we trust this trustworthy God?

Why do we find it so hard to believe that he cares for us?

Because we live in a world where "evil losers" seem to be getting the upper hand.

The world is captive to the powers of sin and darkness.

And that tempts us to strike back out of fear and anger.

Verse 8 of our lesson for today describes the devil as a “roaring lion” who prowls around “looking for someone to devour.” And the devil “bites” us with the “teeth” of fear and mistrust.

To go back to my dog illustration, do you know what happens when a dog has a master that is not trustworthy? Do you know what happens when a dog is abused?

There are two possibilities.

The first is that the dog becomes so fearful that he cowers whenever any human or animal comes into his presence.

And the second possibility is that the animal becomes so aggressive that he is destructive to himself and others. When that basic relationship of trust is broken, man’s best friend can become man’s worst nightmare.

This breach of trust between man and man’s best friend is analogous to our relationship with God and each other.

If we do not trust in the goodness of God, that lack of trust spills out in our relationships with others. And the result is a world ruled not by love but by terror and anger and lies.

We are devoured by our own fears.

What was the basic sin of Adam and Eve?

They succumbed to the temptation of the serpent and mistrusted the goodness of God.

They wanted to be like God.

They didn’t want God to care for them.

They wanted to care for themselves.

And their lack of humility before God caused a break in their relationship with God and with each other.

Much of the Old Testament is a recitation of man’s inhumanity to man. It is filled with violence and lies and deceit. (In other words, it is a lot like the history of the world today.)

But, God's Word makes the "Genesis" of this violent world plain.

Sin came into the world when human beings refused to trust and depending upon the goodness of God.

The Christians in Asia Minor knew all this.

But, the prejudice and persecution in their life made them susceptible to the evil one.

Like the good dog that turns bad when it is abused, these Christians might be tempted to perpetuate the cycle of evil by "taking the law into their own hands."

If they did that, they would be devoured by the devil.
Instead of trusting God's care, they would trust in themselves.

And the results would be disastrous.

A WORD FOR OUR TIME

A lot of the commentaries I read this week suggested that this is a difficult passage to preach in the United States because it is about persecution. And we do not have persecution in our land. That's a problem for other Christians in other lands.

I think they're wrong.
1 Peter is really about spiritual warfare.
How do we trust God in a world that unstable?

The temptation to fight fire with fire is all around us ... no matter where we live.

How do we respond to prejudice and anger and violent acts?
What is the Christian thing to do?

Two events in the news this past week are instructive.
There was a terrorist bombing in Manchester in the UK that killed mainly young girls going to a concert. Apparently the suicide bomber targeted these youngsters to gain maximum shock effect.

Evil. No question about the devil's fingerprints on this one.

But, by and large the people in the UK responded with the motto that was used after the Pulse tragedy. "Love is stronger than hate."

In other words, they said in effect, "We will not let our lives be defined by your terror."

That was encouraging.

But, something else happened in Portland, Oregon that was not so encouraging.

A man was harassing a woman who was wearing a hijab on the commuter train.

And two people tried to stop the harassment.

But, the one who was hurling those racial slurs became even more angry and stabbed both of the Good Samaritans. Both of them were killed in the attack. He jumped off the train at the next stop, but fortunately he was quickly apprehended by the authorities.

I don't know, but I suspect this angry attack could have been fueled by the one that happened previously. When people feel under attack, the natural tendency is to strike back.

That's what this unstable person did, and the results were tragic.

Fortunately, most of us won't do something like this.

But, we might be tempted to use angry speech and prejudicial statements. We might be tempted to trust in laws that exclude and walls that divide.

When we do that the terrorists win.

The cycle of violence is perpetuated.

We put our trust in the wrong thing.

Using the words of the apostle Paul, the answer to this spiritual warfare is the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit.

(See Ephesians 6:16-17)

These are not weapons of war, but words of grace that conquer evil.

Our trust is in the steadfast love of the Lord.
Our trust is in the goodness of God.
We believe God cares for us.

We must resist the temptation of retaliation and instead trust in the Lord,
our Shepherd to protect us.

THE REST OF THE STORY

Peter reminded the Christians in Asia Minor that though they felt like they
were exiles, that they were alone in their struggle, it was not so.

They had brother and sisters, fellow Christians all over the ancient world
who were also suffering for the faith.

But, their suffering would not be in vain.

Peter said,
“You know the rest of the story.
This suffering will last only a little while but God’s grace will last forever.

One day grace is going to win the day completely.
But, in the meantime trust in God as revealed in Christ.”

Peter closes this section with a list of adjectives that describe how God
cares for us.
He wrote,

“God will restore you.
God will mend the broken places in your life.

God will support you.
God will help you keep the faith during the tough times.

God will strengthen you.

God will establish you.
In an unstable world, God will bring stability to your life.”

And then Peter ends this section with a word of praise, "To him be the power forever and ever. Amen."

Friends, I don't know what fear you face today.
But, I do know this.
All of us here today face fear and anxiety.

Don't keep that fear to yourself.
Cast your anxiety upon the Lord.

He cares for you.
And God calls us to care for each other.

"To him be the power forever and ever."

Amen.